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# COLUMBIAN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BY

HON. H. W. CHILDS,

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## I.

In the early centuries of the Christian era Norsemen became distinguished upon the sea. They had swept the coasts of Europe in their staunch ships and plundered and levied tribute upon many an English town before the close of the eighth century. These rugged "sons of the fiord" recognized no other bounds to their roving than their own whims and caprices. Their brave keels plowed the waters of the Mediterranean, even to Algiers and Constantinople, and their stout axes were wielded against "Magyar and Saracen." But the spirit of plunder came to yield in time to that of colonization. Normandy confessed them master and became their province. Norseman blood mixed with Norman, and in the person of William the Conqueror triumphed on the field of Hastings.

They settled, too, in Ireland, and planted their roof trees over the greater part of Scotland. Deterred neither by distance nor tempestuous seas, they sought the bleak shores of Iceland, and there planted one of the most remarkable settlements known to the history of civilization. It is now more than a thousand years since that settlement was made, yet on that island, itself the chance child of plutonic forces, where the language of the Norseman is still spoken in its purity, and where their glorious deeds, preserved in poetry and saga, are still recited by elder sons in the half-singing tones of the Skalds of old, grew up a literature of wondrous richness.

Well may we marvel, whose lots are cast under friendlier skies, that in that home of poverty, where life is maintained only by continuous strife with the elements, civilization bloomed in its fairest forms. While continental Europe lay shrouded in a night of deepest ignorance, learning's lamp was brightly burning and tolerance had gained the mastery among that interesting people. And there, too, was framed and adopted an enlightened code of jurisprudence in which a system of trial by jury had been carefully worked out, thus anticipating the fame of Runnymede by more than two hundred and fifty years. Not only Iceland, but the still more bleak and distant Greenland received their settlements. For four hundred years at least, the sails of commerce kept that land of ice in touch with European countries. Bristol merchants exchanged their goods in Greenland marts; and there the representatives of the Church of Rome administered holy consolation.

Why doubt that these adventurous seamen had become acquainted with the American coast long before the Columbian voyage? Accident or adventure must have impelled them thither on some occasion during the centuries of commercial intercourse carried on with those northern countries. The evidence of Leif Ericson's voyage, which further time and research will only strengthen, is already as conclusive to the candid inquirer as is that on which rests the illustrious achievement of 1492.



The Columbian voyage was the logical sequence and culmination of a series of illustrious intellectual achievements. As a rational enterprise it is expressive of the highest attainments of science at the close of the fifteenth century. It was the final triumph of the teachings of Thales. But between the Ionian astronomer and the Genoese discoverer stretched a vale of ignorance and prejudice, with only here and there a hill-top lighted with the beams of the eternal truth. Thales had taught the true form of the earth six centuries before our era. The work so brilliantly begun in Greece was continued in both the Ionian and Alexandrian schools for centuries thereafter. The fame of these schools is durably founded upon the labors of Pythagoras and Aristotle, Euclid, Hipparchus and Ptolemy.

It should not be overlooked, however, that those great pioneers in the cause of truth are representatives of almost as many distinct ages of Grecian and Egyptian knowledge. Slowly, with steps measured by centuries, science was marching toward that stupendous achievement which the whole civilized world celebrates to-day. The Arab was the torch bearer who transferred the light of the East to the European world. Bagdad and Cordova shone resplendent in the fame of their schools, the wisdom of their teachers and the value and extent of their libraries. It is incredible, however irreconcilable the antagonism between Moor and Spaniard, that the learning of the land of the Caliphs was not felt in the countries by which it was surrounded.

There can be no question that the learned men of Europe had long been acquainted with the teachings of the Alexandrian schools. But applied science is slow of pace. The application of knowledge often demands the rarest genius. There is too frequently a wide gulf between the student and the man of practical affairs; and he who bridges that gulf oftentimes becomes deserving of immortal remembrance.

But more than a knowledge of the earth's sphericity was essential to the great voyage. An agency must be provided whereby the vessel's helm could be grasped with no uncertain

hand in the deepest night, amid the densest fog, and under the cloudiest sky. And this was supplied by the compass and the astrolabe. But another agent still was requisite to the birth of the inspiration which filled the soul of the great navigator. Before a Columbus there must needs have been an Eratosthanes. Geography, aided by its twin sister, astronomy, became early illustrated by the construction of maps. The comprehensive genius of Ptolemy, grouping under one view all knowledge then extant, had composed in the early part of the second century a system of geography which is the groundwork of all that has been subsequently accomplished in that field of thought and labor.

The avalanche of Gothic barbarism which overwhelmed the Roman empire, made Constantinople the only refuge, for a season, of European art, taste and elegance. Almost fruitless is the search in that symposium, however, for evidence of any advance in geographical knowledge beyond the work of Ptolemy. "Except for the Scandinavian world, and some very important additions made to the knowledge of Asia by Marco Polo, the map prepared by him fairly represents," says Fiske, "the maximum of acquaintance with the earth's surface possessed by the Europeans previous to the great voyage of the fifteenth century." Even Ptolemy's work had been lost, perhaps, but for Moorish intervention. This interesting people, bursting forth from their boundaries, scourged the Mediterranean coasts and secured a foothold, maintained for centuries, upon the soil of Spain. There were founded great marts of commerce. There were garnered the rich spoils of the East. Thence sped the sails and caravans of trade. But best of all there learning shed its luster. There the wisest of the earth gathered in its scholastic groves. Mahometan travelers there spent the leisure of their lives in placing in durable forms what they had seen and heard in distant lands. The worthy son of Harun-el-Rashid, himself keenly alive to the importance of geographical knowledge, did not fail to appreciate the value of Ptolemy's masterly work. He caused it to be translated into the language of his people, to whom it became a model and an inspiration.

The boundaries of geographical knowledge had been materially enlarged by Moorish labor and Christian Europe had already felt the impulse thereby imparted long before Prince Henry of Portugal had begun his brilliant career. The harvest was ready for the reaper.

## II.

Genoa is fittingly named superb. Seated on the highway, over which rolled the volume of a great commerce, it strove for centuries for the mastery with Venice. "The patriotic spirit and naval prowess of the Genoese, developed in their defense against the Saracens, led to the foundation of a popular constitution and to the rapid growth of a powerful marine." She wrested from the Saracens many of their seaport towns and planted there her colonies. Her ships were long masters of the sea and bore the richest burdens. The vast hosts of the crusaders, hurled by Rome against the Islam power, contributed for ages to the wealth and prosperity of Genoa. Her sails swept every sea known to European commerce in the middle ages, nor did her seamen fear to venture on discovery.

In a city with such a history was Christopher Columbus born. His birth, in keeping with nearly every other feature of his eventful career, is the subject of learned controversy. Disputes have arisen as to the year, the house, the city and even the country in which he first saw the light. The best authority now ascribes his birth to the city I have named and the year 1436. Obscurity veils his childhood. Scholarship retreats in despair from the effort to trace his ancestry beyond his grandparents. It is conceded that the discoverer of the new world was the son of an humble wool weaver, and that he himself assisted at the loom in early childhood. His education was limited at best. The humble circumstances of his father repressed, rather than inspired, scholastic pursuits. At fourteen he had been caught in the giddy whirl of maritime adventure, which at no place was more pronounced than at Genoa. And why not? The very atmosphere of his native town was rife with the adventures of buccaneers. The news

which sped from one end of the Mediterranean to the other was of fight and plunder, here and everywhere. The sign of the cross did not placate the fury with which Christian strove with Christian, nor had Moorish pride yet been humbled on the plains of Granada.

At Genoa the irrepressible Columbus became fired with the ruling spirit of the age. Little time, indeed, for books had leisure been afforded. Then, too, was it not the golden age of Portugal? The illustrious Prince Henry had but recently closed his glorious career. Men yet wondered at the fame of his explorations. His ships made their way through Southern seas and returned with argosies of wealth. What is the philosophy which could chain the vaulting spirit of the coming admiral? What, but the philosophy of the sea? He had not been Columbus if he had not absorbed rather than learned whatever appertained to the ruling passion of his soul. "The gorgeous churches of Genoa made of Columbus a crusader, its schools a geographer, its palaces filled with paintings and statues an artist, its shores a mariner, its industries and commerce a shrewd calculator and a thorough-going man of business."

We read that he was an expert in cartography. But was not his boyhood passed almost in the very shadow of Benincasa's house, famous for his sea charts? He himself says, "I have associated with scientific men, lay and clerical, of the Latin church and the Greek, with Jew and Moors and many others. To that end the Lord gave me a spirit of understanding. In the science of navigation he endowed me richly; of astronomy and of geometry and arithmetic he gave me what was necessary."

A few years was he voyaging to and fro upon the Mediterranean, now and then coming face to face in bloody fray with Moorish pirates, gleaning here and there the fragments of that knowledge which was soon to kindle in his breast that dauntless zeal which wavered not under the most trying circumstances. Then Lisbon won him.

Already have I spoken of Prince Henry, the patron saint of all the navigators of his day. Lisbon was their Mecca. Bartholomew, a brother of Columbus, his equal as a sailor, his superior in the art of making maps and globes and in the still higher art of persuading and controlling men, had preceded him to Portugal. Not to cross the unknown and trackless Atlantic, save as they unconsciously obeyed the silent mandates of that "divinity that shapes our ends," had the brothers journeyed hitherward. They went there for a livelihood; to practice their art of chartmaking; to enlist, as others of their countrymen had done before them, in maritime adventure. The story of the naval battle near Lisbon, the burning ship, the miraculous escape of the future discoverer by heroic efforts in the sea, is but a cunning blending of fact and fiction, akin to the endless rubbish written to illustrate with what special Providential agency the course of Columbus was directed.

### III.

Columbus arrived in Portugal in 1470. Twenty-two years, full of toil and heart-ache, must yet be crossed before he should attain to the splendid triumph of his life. But the time of his coming, viewed in the light of after events, was most opportune. Then were being gathered the fruits of the art of printing with movable types. The secret treasures of learned monks began thus to find their way into the hands of laymen. Could anything be more natural than that the ministrations of that beneficent discovery should be first and most perceptibly felt in the aid of the foremost enterprise of the age? A world thirsting for the discoveries and speculations of travelers and scientists was sure to hail with unstinted applause the publication of their books. The old geographers, dressed in printer's ink, find their way into laymen's hands.

Columbus had not yet forsaken his native Italy when the famous work of Strabo was issued from the press. Then, too, he had been closely pursued to Portugal by the growing fame and popularity of Pomponius Mela. Manilius had sung the

sphericity of the earth and charmed the monks of the middle ages; but now his measured lines do service in the common ranks of learning. A little later, but in accord with the greater richness of the fruit, is harvested from the press the sublime work of Ptolemy, well styled the prince of astronomers, whose work on geography called forth from Humboldt himself the expressive term "colossal." These and other revelations to the lowly walks of learning were the blessed fruitage of the newly discovered and noble art of printing. The thought of Portugal was profoundly moved by this generous outpouring from the garners of the wise. Who should walk before Columbus in receptivity of this quickening spirit?

Most circumscribed at best was geographical knowledge in 1470. The known was strangely blended with the unknown. The distant was invested with the color of splendid mystery. Superstition and credulity peopled distant seas and lands with the horrible creations of disturbed imagination and with gulfs of flame set barriers to travel. Truth staggered in a drunkenness of marvel. The soberest chronicler of events could not resist the temptation to dip his pen in ink of iridescent hues. Toscanelli could write with no fear of censure, but with certainty of applause, of "two hundred towns, whose marble bridges spanned a single river." It was the age of marvel; and its mongers vied with one another in the richness of their coloring. Toscanelli and Marco Polo, Sir John Mandeville and Nicholas de Conti were a galaxy of stars in the scientific heavens of the fifteenth century. It is impossible to accurately estimate at this time the potency and reach of their influence upon the spirit of discovery in that century following the dissemination of their observations and researches among the reading public.

#### IV.

This is no time to dwell upon the incidents of the domestic life of Columbus. It is far more to our purpose to trace through these causative events which culminated in the great discovery. It is a question of more or less uncertainty when

the idea of reaching India by sailing westward first found lodgment in the mind of Columbus. He had not been a resident of Portugal above four years when he was known to meditate the project. What was its origin? Was it the natural outgrowth of study and reflection, the necessary deduction from given premises, a splendid triumph of the mind? Or was it the knowledge of truth, otherwise derived, selfishly concealed and basely employed for personal advantage? When Columbus urged his views upon the courts of Spain and Portugal, was he inspired with that lofty sincerity characteristic of scientific discovery, or was he but the thrifty merchant seeking to vend at most advantageous terms the wares he had surreptitiously acquired?

The most venomous criticism must concede that long before the year 1492 science had demonstrated, as already suggested, that Cathay might be reached by a westward course. It is the prevailing error of to-day to ascribe to Columbus the first conception of the possibility of reaching India by a westward route. But centuries in advance of him Eratosthenes had held that one might easily sail from Spain to Asia but for the wide expanse of intervening sea. One fact alone robs Columbus forever of every vestige of credit for that conception. Roger Bacon had, two centuries before, gleaned and compiled from ancient writers numerous passages to prove how limited was the distance stretching from Spain to the eastern shore of Asia. On this the great English philosopher had built an argument; and argument and quotation were alike incorporated by the bishop of Cambrai in his great work, the *Imago Mundi*. None of the biographers of Columbus, and their name is legion, forget to say that the *Imago Mundi* was his favorite book. Its effect upon his thoughts was profound and lasting. His copy of it, still preserved, bears every token of close and frequent study. Here, then, between the covers of a single volume, is material sufficient to inflame the imagination, convince the judgment and intensify the zeal of one less impressible than Columbus. It must be noted, too, that by an error of mathematical computation, which had received almost universal acquiescence, the circumference of the earth was materially underestimated, and even those



whose computations accord more nearly with the result of modern times had committed the corresponding error tending to the same practical effect of excessively protruding to the eastward the coast line of China and the islands lying to the east of it. The great genius whose computations were startlingly correct had fallen into the common geographical error.

## V.

We are now prepared to consider what influence, if any, the Norsemen discoveries exercised upon the mind of the immortal Genoese. There are writers who strenuously insist that he is directly indebted for his idea to Icelandic sources. A learned and ingenuous author states it thus: "We must insist that it is, to say the least, highly probable that he had in some way obtained knowledge of the discoveries of the Norsemen in the western ocean, and he thought their Vinland to be the eastern shore of Africa. But no matter what induced him to go to Iceland. We know positively that he went there and over 300 miles beyond it. The last Norse voyage to America of which we have any account was in the year 1347, and is it possible, we ask, that Columbus could have visited Iceland only 130 years later and learned nothing of the famous Vinland the Good?"

The infirmity of this view, as already pointed out by a distinguished writer, is that the gifted author does not produce, nor is there available, the slightest evidence that Columbus ever acquired any such knowledge. The mere fact that he visited Iceland, which, indeed, is not universally assented to, falls far short of proving that he there acquired information regarding Vinland. The cautious inquirer will require more tangible proof than mere hypothesis before impugning the motives of any man; and especially those of one of the greatest benefactors of mankind. Besides, what strange shortsightedness on the part of Columbus to have concealed such knowledge, if he possessed it, when zealously importuning aid from king and noble. Col. Higginson has happily said that "an ounce of Vinland would have been worth a pound of cosmography" to this project. It is reasonable that in all the



fifteen years in which he was moved by his sublime purpose, disputing with the learned, appealing with burning eloquence to kings and courtiers, listening to the incredulous verdicts of counseling jundos, rebuffed at times with jibes and sneers, that the one masterly argument which must have silenced criticism and enlisted the enthusiastic support of the king of Portugal, had never escaped his lips? A painstaking survey of the whole question compels the belief that Norsemen discoveries contribute in no respect to the Columbian achievement.

Italy was a land of bold and sagacious navigators. "There is nothing," says Winsor, "more striking in the history of American discovery than the fact that the Italian people furnished to Spain Columbus, to England Cabot and to France Verrazani, and that the leading powers of Europe, following as maritime explorers in the lead of Portugal, who could not dispense with Vespuccius, another Italian, pushed their rights through men whom they had borrowed from the central region of the Mediterranean, while Italy, in its own name, never possessed a rood of American soil."

There is the faintest belief that Columbus offered the golden opportunity to his native Genoa, and was denied; then to her rival, Florence, and yet denied. Certain it is that to Portugal the opportunity came and was, in an evil hour, declined. The luster shed upon this people by the glorious work of Prince Henry was seriously darkened by the prudent and costly trickery of its king, John II. When to the last-named monarch Columbus had disclosed his project and had half-convinced him by his burning zeal and persuasive reasoning he was rewarded by an order of the king sending a ship secretly to test the experiment of the westward voyage. It failed, of course, for what captain, fired with a zeal less than that which filled the breast of Columbus, could pilot a ship across those unknown and terrifying seas?

The insult drove Columbus to the court of Spain. Already his brother Bartholomew had caught his brother's spirit and sailed to England to procure the aid of its sovereign. The land

of Roger Bacon refused to demonstrate the wisdom of her gifted child. France, too, failed to recognize the angel of glory in the Genoese chartmaker. To undeserving Spain attached the imperishable renown. It is a weary story of waiting, taunts and ridicule, a cup of bitterness drunk to the lees, a heart bereft of hope, thoughts filled with despair, that records the final triumph of Columbus in the impulsive conduct of Isabella of Castile. To that princess belongs the never-ending praise, whatever the actuating sentiment, of affording substantial encouragement to the mighty enterprise.

The port of Palos, long since abandoned by the fleets of commerce, is immortalized by the three small caravels which issued from it in the early morning of Aug. 3, 1492.

## VI.

Greatly do they err who see in Columbus but the common man. True enough, his character presents a picture of strong lights and deep shadows. He was "seer and traveler, visionary and calculator; crusader and mathematician, a sort of Isaiah in his prophetic insight, and banker in his computations, his thoughts set upon religion and business alike; a sublime oracle from whose lips predictions fell in impetuous torrents, and a singularly bad governor, resorting to irregular and arbitrary measures; advocating the conquest of the Holy Sepulcher through a mighty effort of his devout will, and of the mines of Golconda by a shorter route to India than any then known; ever in suspense between lofty ideas and idle fable, believer in magic and student of nature, mystic and astronomer: so multiplied and various are his traits that they scarcely come within the group of any logical chain of reasoning." Such is Castelar's vivid and masterly pen-painting of this man of matchless fame. Grant his many foibles, his numerous sins of omission and commission, all that his detractors urge, and they are many, yet there still attaches to him, deathless as the mighty world he brought to light, the sublime attribute of Discoverer of America.

"It grew to be time's burst of dawn,  
He gained a world; he gave that world  
Its grandest lesson, On! and On!"

The inspired faith of Columbus impelled him to a fruitless search for the gorgeous palaces and magnificent capitals of Cathay. He died unconscious of the fact that between this island, on which he raised the standard of Castile and the possessions of the grand Cham, slept a virgin world and stretched an almost endless waste of sea. Yet the fascinating visions with which his thoughts were filled have been more than realized in the work of the four centuries which close to-day. It may be said of him more than of any other man that "he builded better than he knew."

Not the old and suffocating East, but the new and promising West, responded to the wave-beat of the best of European civilization. The great discovery was the rescue of the imperiled spirit of civil liberty. The champions of the opposing forces in the Old World strove for the mastery of the New. One built its watch fires in the South American peninsula, the other on the rock of Plymouth. The former emitted neither light nor warmth, the latter became the beacon of the world. A grand idea, shining brightly for a season in the schools of Greece, and then in those of Italy, but well-nigh extinguished in the universal gloom of later ages, reasserting itself along the Rhine and around the industrious fires of the Netherlands and in the land of Cromwell and Milton, became a well-defined and resistless purpose, in Independence hall, on the 4th day of July, 1776. To-day it thrills the world; a mighty people, planted in the choicest territory of the earth, are moved and actuated by it. It is the mission of that people to dominate the earth, not by the devastation of the sword, but by those pacific agencies whose progress is marked by a wealth of moral, intellectual and material blessings. Already it has enriched mankind in spiritual and material achievements beyond all precedent.

A great thinker has said: "The world's scepter passed from Persia to Greece, from Greece to Italy, from Italy to Great Britain, and from Great Britain the scepter is to-day departing. It is passing to Greater Britain, to our mighty West, there to remain, for there is no further West; beyond is the Orient. Like the star in the east, which guided the three kings with their

treasure westward until it stood still over the cradle of the young Christ, so the star of empire rising in the east has ever beckoned the wealth and power of the nations westward, until to-day it stands still over the empire of the West, to which the nations are bringing their offerings."

O mother of a mighty race,  
Yet lovely in thy youthful grace;  
The elder dames, thy haughty peers,  
Admire and hate thy blooming years;  
With words of shame  
And taunts of scorn, they join thy name.

There's freedom at thy gates, and rest  
For earth's downtrodden and opprest,  
A shelter for the hunted head,  
For the starved laborer toil and bread.  
Power at thy bounds,  
Stops, and calls back his baffled hounds.

O fair young mother! On thy brow  
Shall sit a nobler grace than now.  
Deep in the brightness of the skies,  
The thronging years in glory rise,  
And, as they fleet,  
Drop strength and riches at thy feet.



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